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ABSTRACT

Various sets of actors in an urban desegregated high school are found to use a rhetoric of concern to discuss school operation and events. This rhetoric is based upon the accepted understanding that schools do "what's best" for students. Since the rhetoric appeals to diverse segments of the community in which the school is located, it enables school officials to manage the conflicting demands of maintaining control and gaining the confidence of the community. The rhetoric of concern allows school people to talk about control in ways which build trust. Although this kind of language is useful in gaining a consensus, in the high school described the rhetoric is dysfunctional for dealing with the persistent problems of race relations between blacks, Spanish Americans and southern whites. (Author/GC)

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THE RHETORIC OF CONCERN--
TRUST AND CONTROL IN AN URBAN DESEGREGATED SCHOOL*

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ABSTRACT

Various sets of actors in an urban desegregated high school are found to use a rhetoric of concern to discuss events in and the operation of the school. This rhetoric is based upon the accepted understanding that schools do "what's best for kids". Since the rhetoric appeals to diverse segments of the Pawnee community, it enables school officials to manage the conflicting demands of maintaining control and gaining the confidence of the community. The rhetoric of concern allows school people to talk about control in ways which build trust. Although this kind of language is useful in gaining a consensus, it is dysfunctional for dealing with the persistent problems of race relations in this desegregated high school.

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The Rhetoric of Concern--
Trust and Control in an Urban Desegregated School

Introduction

Public school desegregation has become an increasingly complex aspect of national social policy. Such phenomena as continued residential segregation in major cities (Farley, 1975) and the persistent income differentials between blacks and whites (Masters, 1975; Sewell and Hauser, 1975) have limited the ability of public schools to provide equal educational opportunity. Data accumulated by social scientists in the years since national policy was set in the Brown cases have been of little help to policy makers in designing more effective means of delivering quality learning experiences to American youth of different races (Cohen and Weiss, 1976; Crain, 1976). The issue is further complicated by the moral implications presented by school desegregation (Poussaint and Lewis, 1976). Many voices can be heard in the "national discourse on school integration" but there seems to be no single perspective which "can encompass all the divergencies inherent in the phenomenon" (Rist, 1976:417).

The research reported in this paper focuses on the nature of the discourse about desegregation in one urban desegregated public high school. We find that "talk about desegregation" is surrounded by a "rhetoric of concern" which is based upon an ideology of schools as instruments of social good. The rhetoric functions to deal with two problems facing the high school: controlling student behavior in the building and building trust among the community which the high school serves. Although the language works to some degree in balancing the demands associated with these two pressures, it seems to be dysfunctional for efforts in dealing with race relations in the high school.

Pawnee[1] - a brief description

Pawnee is a medium sized city of 85,000 located on the northern fringe of a major midwestern industrial city. The residents are poor relative to their neighbors in the surrounding affluent county. The presence of three large factories has contributed to the growth pattern of Pawnee by attracting workers from various sections of the country, making Pawnee a town of remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity for its size. At the latest census, the black population is approximately 23,000 (from 3,000 in 1940 and 7,000 at the end of World War II); the Hispanic population is a mixture of Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican migrants and other Spanish speaking groups and is estimated to represent ten percent of the total population of the city. The remaining white population is primarily rural southern and Appalachian.

Culturally, Pawnee is a southern town, in marked contrast to its technological and geographical position. Speech patterns as well as food customs suggest the strength of the southern background. This quality of small town southern influence is particularly important in everyday interaction among both black and white residents.

The economic recession has taken its toll on Pawnee, and the unemployment rate has hovered around 25 percent for several months, occasionally soaring to almost one out of three unemployed. The difficulties of Pawnee's industrial plants and the loss of Pawnee's importance as a commercial center are two indications of the serious economic problems which face the city. In the 1970 census the average family income of Pawnee was almost $1,000 below the national average, and poverty is a serious problem in the town.

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[1]Pawnee is a pseudonym for the city in which this research was conducted. The actual high school where we did our fieldwork is disguised as Pawnee West High School.

Pawnee has experienced considerable loss of whites to nearby more affluent suburbs during the past two decades, particularly as new expressways have made the surrounding villages attractive suburban locations for residents of the larger industrial city nearby. Urban renewal efforts have left many blocks of empty space in the center of the city, and the boarded-up downtown shops testify to the commercial strength of suburban shopping centers. However, some growth signs are also evident; a new multi-million dollar sports arena has recently been built in the city. This aroused great controversy because of the funds borrowed to build the faciltiy, but also serves as a source of community pride. Another source of pride is the designation of Pawnee as an "All American" city.

For over fifty years Pawnee West High School was housed in a rambling red brick building located on four acres of land about one mile due west of the geographical center of Pawnee. The old building was a landmark in the community and directions are still given with reference to "old West".

The new building which houses Pawnee West is starkly modern in contrast to the traditional appearance of the old high school building which it replaced. It is a low, sprawling, gray concrete structure. On first view, one notices an apparent absence of windows which gives the building what some informants have termed a "prison-like" appearance. In fact, there are windows around the outside walls of the third and fourth levels. However, since very few classrooms are on the outside walls, the absence of windows in the classrooms reinforces this "windowless" impression for those who enter the building. The overall appearance is of a modern high school building which is located on an attractive and spacious campus.

Historically, blacks in Pawnee attended West High School at first because it was the only high school in the city and later because it was located near the major concentration of black population in Pawnee. Many people told us that the court-ordered busing had little or no impact at West since "we've always been desegregated". This fact contributes to the identification of West as "the black high school" long after equal numbers of blacks attend both city secondary schools. Moreover, the relatively longer experience which West has had with racial mixing does not reduce the potential for racial confrontations that are so much a part of the history of desegregation in Pawnee. The experience of this history of violence continues to make race an issue in residents' perceptions of the schools in Pawnee.

Control or trust--a dilemma in a desegregated school

The persistence of race as a factor in the Pawnee schools present staff at Pawnee West with two related but seemingly contradictory problems. The everpresent threat of violence dictates strong control measures which are aimed at reducing the potential for confrontations. The need for these controls is clearly stated by one of the officials at West:

> Look, you have to remember for the past ten years the chief mandate from the Superintendent and the Board of Education was not to let the kids hurt each other. We were responding to that and that's important. The safety of the clientele was the primary concern of the school.

The response at Pawnee West to this "chief mandate" is to rely upon the "hard walls" to "screen out" those external influences that disturb order in the building and to manage internal space by carefully controlling "student time". These techniques are designed to reduce the level of fear among people at West. Fear of violence was especially noticeable among white parents during the initial phases of the desegregation plan. We have evi-

dence that the level of fear has been reduced for at least some of the clients of West. One white parent told us:

> Listen, the kids like school. My son wouldn't want to leave Pawnee, he wouldn't want to leave Pawnee West. Oh, sure he knows where to go and where not to go, he won't go into the "john" but they learn very quickly, they catch on what's safe and what isn't safe. . . .
> But look, even I walk around all the time and I'm not afraid. You know, if you can get parents into the place, into the schools, they find out it's not nearly as bad as they thought it was. You know, they think it's a jungle in here and it's really not like that at all.

This comment is echoed by a black male student at West:

> [Students] get along good. Like I always hear about fighting in [a neighboring city] . I haven't seen anything like that--you might see a fight here or there but the majority of the time and they might be between black and white. But then again you might just see black and then again you might just see white brothers. So like you really don't see blacks ganging on whites and blacks. . . .
> I've seen a couple of fights. I've never seen or heard of any school without being in no fight.

Finally the mother of a black student states her evaluation of West's ability to protect her children.

> . . . But this school's allright, though. They make the kids mind, they won't take any stuff. They sent this note home saying what all they'd do with the kids if they were caught doing anything. I know they don't stand for no fighting.

These comments of students and parents indicate that the control devices are moderately successful--the level of concern for safety seems manageable for at least many of the white clients of West. The imposition of the controls necessary to reduce fear, however, detracts attention from the major goal of the schools, education, and serves to reduce the level of trust which the community is willing to place in the effectiveness of its schools to deliver appropriate learning experience.

Trust is an important factor in conducting the everyday activities of client-serving organizations (Bidwell, 1970). This trust involves more than the activities of any individual in the school context. McDermott (1977:199) points out:

> Trust is not a property of persons but a product of the work people do to achieve trusting relations, given particular institutional contexts.

The "work" which Pawnee West staff has done to accomplish "the chief mandate" to establish control is interpreted by some residents of Pawnee as attempts to "push out" their children and deprive them of a "decent education". Many parents in the black community mistrust the efforts of school officials in Pawnee to control students and interpret the emphasis on control mechanisms as a failure to teach their children. One black parent comments:

> Some of the teachers I don't think even teach them anything. The kids just probably come in the room and sit down and if they don't do anything, then the teachers don't bother them. Then this attitude rubs off on the kids. My son has told me time and time again, "It doesn't matter if I'm late. I'm not going to be doing anything anyway. We don't do anything in homeroom". That's what he said. He said they don't do anything in homeroom. . . .

For this parent, not doing "anything in homeroom" reinforces a mistrust of the ability of the schools to provide preparation for the adult world. An important feature of contemporary race relations is the strong belief among black Americans that whites are not trustworthy. The historic experience of black Americans provides little to challenge this attitude and it is one that many black people in Pawnee share. The identification of the schools as white institutions in Pawnee persists among the black community and prevents commitment to the educational organizations. Therefore, although there is a high degree of confidence among Pawnee blacks in the utility of

education in general, there is a persistent suspicion about any particular school building.

Black parents seem especially suspicious of suspensions and expulsions when used as control devices, even when they admit the needs for control at West. One black parent sees a deteriorated situation at West compared to when she was a student there.

> Things seemed to have been diffrent back in those days. I don't remember thinking of West as a particularly bad place to be, but now that my kids are there I think it is pretty bad. Things have changed so much though, you know.

The particular aspect of Pawnee West which alarms this parent involves what is emerging at the latest "control" issue at the high school--expulsions and suspensions. This mother told us that:

> . . . they tried to expel my child from [Pawnee West] and a friend of mine told me that they just couldn't do that. They just couldn't put him out like that and all these charges that they had against him were just simply illegal. That even if a person is arrested seven times and then taken to court on the eighth time for another offense they can't bring all the other seven charges against him. What they did to me, they sent me this long list of things my son had done and said that he was going to be expelled from school. Well, what I did was we went to this lawyer and he said "Did you do this?" and he [my son] admitted to doing most of the things which weren't that serious so we took it to court and he is still in school.

Other black parents "see a pattern" in these disciplinary matters and show a growing resistance to accepting the results of the process. As another black mother told us:

> . . .I know they [school officials] like to put them out then they can get rid of them and they get rid of the ones that might speak up and that might say something that is going on. I think that is what is going on now, that the reason they expel so many kids from school without the proper rights because the parents don't know what the student rights are. They are just out of school. . . . They want them out of there, they want it that way but they aren't getting rid of my kids--I know what their rights are.

The "political" overtones of this issue can be seen in the more developed "theories" about the process of expulsion held by certain parents. In a long interview which focused on attempts by the West staff to control information about West, a black parent describes the "tactic" of "hushing things up".

> Don't you know that [hushing things up] is a tactic? Don't you know that that is the way the system operates?. . . They don't want to know that our school district isn't the most perfect in the world. The way it sounds when people talk about the school district is that they have the best of everything. They have so many community workers, community relations workers, social workers, every kind of workers you can name, that is going to help somebody but nobody gets help, nobody gets help. The ones that get help probably don't need the help but the ones that need the help don't get it. And you're doggone right that when something happens or any type of violence--if a kid has a knife you don't hear about it. You don't hear about half the stuff that goes on around here. That's because they are whisked off to the office and put out of school and that is the end of that.

According to this interpretation, the officials at Pawnee West are exercising control by withholding information. Parents, especially blacks, are not willing to trust the "official accounts" of the school reality provided by West staff.

Two problems, then, seem to confront school officials at Pawnee West: the problem of guaranteeing the safety of their clients and the problem of providing a quality educational experience for the students at West. The situation is complicated by the fact that the interest of different racial groups lead to different interpretations of the devices which staff implement to solve each problem. The task that confronts West staff is to find ways of building trust while at the same time reducing fear through control mechanisms. We believe that this has been accomplished through the use of a "rhetoric of concern" whose "wide fan of messages" appeals to both communities of interest. We will explain this rhetoric in some detail below and illustrate the use of this language from our data.

A rhetoric of concern

The actors at Pawnee West are confronted with the dilemma of maintaining order and building trust among a suspicious clientele. We argue that this dilemma is avoided by talking about control in a way which creates trust. The measures that are seen as necessary for protecting students within the building are justified on the basis of "concern" or "caring" for their well-being. The importance of "taking care of the children" is so deeply ingrained that it is accepted by all segments of the Pawnee population. To the extent that control measures can be presented as a part of what is necessary to "take care of the students", the suspicions of black parents can be relieved while the fears of white parents are alleviated by the control measures. We refer to this way of talking about control as a rhetoric of concern.

The "realistic" function of rhetoric, according to Kenneth Burke (1969:43), is to provide "a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols". In speech of this kind, the intent of the communication goes beyond simply transmitting the manifest content of the message. Rhetoric, thus, takes on the quality of ritual: it "says something about the speaker, the spoken to, and the situation, which goes beyond the surface message" (Parkin, 1975:114). In situations of intense disagreement, the appeal to something "which goes beyond the surface message" may produce consensus and a lessening of conflict within a given system. At Pawnee West, it is the importance of concern which provides the basis for consensus. Parkin (1975:117) summarizes the features which make rhetoric effective:[1]

[1]Parkin's (1975) analysis involves the differing levels of abstractness in "ideologies", "plans" and "quasi-plans". He argues that as consensus emerges the level of abstractness in the surface messages declines in the political context. We will not concern ourselves with the relative specificity of messages in the school context and we will deal primarily with the rhetoric that supports the most abstract messages.

> . . .the surface messages contained in the verbal pronouncements. . . are conspicuous for their lack of specificity; their ambivalent and sometimes contradictory exhortations; and, by offering a wide-range of interpretations, their communicability to otherwise disparate elements in population.

We will use the term rhetoric to refer to the formalized content of many speech acts of actors at Pawnee West.[1] The formalized content is very general in nature and is consistent with a wide-range of meanings. The staff at Pawnee West have come to rely upon non-specific and ambiguous language to describe their activities as a response to the often conflicting demands placed upon them by the black and white communities in Pawnee.

What we call a "rhetoric of concern" is to be found in the variety of messages that tell the various Pawnee West publics that "caring" about students is essential for an effective education. These messages are both positive and negative and are used both to justify and to criticize the activities of key participants in the education of students. We frequently heard staff people remark that "We are trying our best for the children" or "We really care about kids here". The statements vary little and all make some mention of the deep concern of the staff for the well-being of the students at West. The formalized content of these messages includes fundamental societal values about education, schools, teaching, and parenting that transcend any particular situation in which they are uttered. These messages appeal to a "lowest common communication factor" which even the most disparate elements of the Pawnee community share. Moreover, the rhetoric seems to be used unconsciously by the actors at West and we have no evidence that the formalized content is not believed

[1]It is more common to use rhetoric to apply to a formalized manner of presentation (Bloch, 1975). However, our data indicate that although the manner of presentation varies, substantially the same content appears throughout the range of messages. The quality of this speech which relies upon accepted "recipes" that are unquestioned is what we hope to capture by calling this language rhetoric.

by the speakers. The "talk about caring for students" however, is characterized by generalizations whose very ambiguity smoothes over any inherent inconsistencies and, thus, protects the speaker from contradiction.

We find the rhetoric of concern used to "explain" changes in the school schedule and the suspension of several school activities which followed an especially violent phase of desegregation in Pawnee. In order to prevent the congregation of large groups of students inside the school building, lunch periods were eliminated and the school day shortened. Lunch was a particularly difficult period during which to control students. Therefore, food is not "officially" served to students during the school day despite the inattention which hunger seems to produce in the last class hours at West. Several groups sell "snacks" at different times during school as fund-raising projects. Questions about the nutritional value of the "snacks" are answered by comments that "the kids would eat the junk anyway". Besides nutrition is a secondary concern to the difficulty of providing a safe atmosphere in the building which "you just can't do when you have to give them lunch". In other words, "it's good for kids" to be hungry.

Also there were severe cuts in the number of extracurricular activities that were held. A Parent Club member explained:

> Music program, some of the school dances, pep assembly. . . [t]hings like this that they had to cut out for awhile. . . [b]ecause you know for awhile things were so bad up there the kids would be so unruly during the assemblies and pep assemblies and things that you couldn't hear the groups that were performing or anything you know so they just completely cut out <u>all</u> of that.

One school official told us why floats were no longer a part of the big Homecoming parade:

> You know we went to no floats a couple of years ago. They got burned and torn up and that kind of stuff. We just couldn't have it--they were too much work to be wasted. So we just decorate cars--things the kids can do at the last minute.

Concern for students is used by both these speakers to "justify" the cessation of student activities. Few question the intensity of the situations to which they refer or the responsibility of school staff to impose some degree of order in student relations. The rhetoric of concern clearly applies to these emergency situations. However, application of the rhetoric was associated with a severe limitation of the range of activities available for students at West. Many believe that the crisis has passed and dispute the continued application of emergency measures. What is of interest here is that the same language is used to argue against limiting student activities as is used to support continued control.

We were continually struck by the consistency with which the rhetoric of concern was used by participants in the school arena to describe their reactions to events. Concern for students' best interest motivates this staff member's resistance to a proposed change in the scheduling procedure:

> Like this mini-course business; you know, that worked well at a 9th grade school but I'm not convinced that it would work here and that I really fought against. . . . I don't think kids learn in them. . . . You know the argument that's made is that the kids have a free choice, but really the only justification is the kids don't have to put up with things that they don't like. You know, if you don't like a teacher you only have to put up with him for ten weeks. That may be true but that certainly isn't an educational justification. Kids do not necessarily have a choice in terms of really learning. That's what this game is all about. . . .

It is a mark of this person's concern for "what's best for kids" that leads him to resist pressures to change the scheduling of classes at West. However, a very similar language of concern is used by others who insist the present scheduling mechanisms are ineffective. According to one teacher, the prevailing, but misguided, notion of what students need results in poor academic performance.

> There are still some good kids but they aren't prepared to do the work. Counselors are part of the problem. If you talk to counselors, talk to an honest counselor, they'll tell you, (I did not ask her who was an honest counselor.) [They] tell kids and counselors that if they think they will get a B or C in a college prep course, they should take a general course where they will get an A. It doesn't matter that the kid will be bored stiff. It's so far below him he doesn't pay attention and doesn't get the A anyhow.

Both actors appeal to the same rhetoric in making their case. They may disagree about the specific issue at hand, but in terms of the basis on which the decisions should be made, they are in harmony.

The pervasiveness of this rhetoric is indicated by the fact that staff are not alone in using language of this kind in understanding events that occur at West. An active West parent sees her entire life in terms of "caring" for students:

> . . .whenever I see kids and I know they need help, I'm there. Almost all the kids in Pawnee know me. You know when you care about people they just come around. That's how I've made my life. Caring about people. . . ."

"Being there" and "caring" are important social values but their application in any particular instance may not be straightforward. Another staff member explained to a group of students that:

> The people in the halls are really there to keep strangers out--its for your own good.

However, students look for different indicators of concern from the West staff. One white female told us of a teacher who "cares":

> . . . like you'll be running down the hall from someone because somebody is chasing you for skipping or something and you'll pass his room and you will jump in the room. He'll hide you. They come in and say has he been there? "No". As soon as they turn around he'll let you out. He'll cuss you out. . . but you know if you don't like a situation that you are in a class and you are not going to the class and you are not getting along with the teacher and if you go on there and talk to him about it, he is not going to fake about it and tell well you have this for your class and this is a necessary thing to do in life and everything. . . . Y ou know he is going to be honest with you about it; you know he is not going to sit back and say, "Well, this necessary in life. You have to know how to speak French or whatever your class is. . . . So he is just that kind of person. He'd be somebody to study.

This teacher demonstrates concern by providing a haven for students who seem to be resisting the very devices which have been instituted "for their own good". Again we see an instance where the same kind of language, the rhetoric of concern, is used to apply to two entirely different conditions. The generality of the rhetoric masks the very real differences in the perspectives of the speakers.

The rhetoric of concern is the basis for many evaluations of staff at West. Students attribute "failing" to a lack of teacher concern. Although the following comment does not specify what "caring" would entail, "caring" is clearly important in this student's view:

> I don't think he really cared. When people would say I'm flunking, he would say that is no concern of mine. I think he could have cared just a little bit more--maybe more of them would have passed.

Severe criticism is directed at those teachers who do not take a personal interest in their students. A black parent recounted her distress at West teachers who "just leave the students alone":

> No, they don't care what kind of work they do. They just leave them alone. They leave them alone and I guess they think that if they want to do it they will if they don't want to they won't. But I think that high school is kind of young to treat kids that way. You have to keep telling them and telling them.

The failure of teachers to stress repetition indicates for this woman that staff "just don't care". Several students echo this theme in their comments about teachers' pecuniary motivations. A typical interchange occurred in one of our interviews with ninth graders:

> Well, since you're not a teacher I can tell you, but some of the teachers around here just don't know what they are talking about. They just come here for the money, I think. I think they just come here and put in time and they don't care one way or another. . . . Half of them just as soon come here and not have kids here at all. They don't care whether you learn or not.

It is sufficient for this student to tell us that teachers are only interested in money to demonstrate their lack of concern for students. No attempt is made to specify the dimensions of "caring".

A rhetoric of concern which emphasizes the necessity of providing for student well-being organizes the experience of many of the actors at Pawnee West. The appeal of this language to a "deeper" value serves to defuse some of the suspicion which surrounds the application of control devices in the high school. However, this rhetoric also extends beyond the intra-building matters and is used to cover the whole process of desegregation in Pawnee.

Rhetoric and desegregation

To summarize, then, fear and mistrust are two difficult problems which are associated with race relations at Pawnee West High School. The institutional response to fear is an emphasis on control and the basis of

trust-building is the rhetoric of concern. Although these devices have been effective in their own domains, they have allowed little to be accomplished in the broader arena of urban education. Pawnee high schools are confronted with the criticism that they are not "meeting the needs" of substantial numbers of Pawnee students and the staff at Pawnee West are continually searching for more effective teaching techniques that will "reach out" to more of their students. Meanwhile increasingly large proportions of students are "dropping out" or "being pushed out" of the high school.

The view of desegregation as an accomplished fact at Pawnee West obscures the persistence of racial concerns in high school social interactions. People at the school are generally reluctant to talk about race. They will answer direct questions and occasionally volunteer a comment in connection with a specific topic. For example, most students know the race of the school symbolic student leaders and will offer an opinion about the appropriateness of the boy being black and the girl being white. But most often we are told that "people get along well now" so that there is no need to talk about the subject of race. This reluctance is understandable given the negative publicity which previous racial confrontations brought the school. Most participants believe that the notoriety was distorted and grossly unfair and wish to avoid a similar experience. Avoidance of discussion of the issue of race relations, however, gives "talk about desegregation" a rhetorical quality.

Today, desegregation is ritualistically used to emphasize the ethnic diversity of the student body at Pawnee West and in Pawnee, an "All-American" city. Students of all races and cultural backgrounds are pictured as sharing a common educational future. "Caring" has triumphed

over the destructive forces that opposed busing and a few short years ago threatened to rip Pawnee in two. Students of all races now find themselves in a stable educational environment that offers many unique learning opportunities, not the least of which is the experience of a multi-racial setting. In short, the people at West are proud of their record on desegregation: they have successfully accomplished "mixing black and white students" since "racial confrontations" are a thing of the past. We heard many expressions of this rhetoric but one of the most moving was a speech given by a pro-busing parent describing West's experiences to other parents facing a court-ordered desegregation program.

> This is a great opportunity for us to help improve the status of mankind. We have a chance right now to dissolve some of the racial tensions by teaching our children to accept their Spanish-speaking neighbor, their white neighbor, their black neighbor. We should diligently teach our children to try to understand them.

One variant of this theme at West was the statement made repeatedly that if students could be left alone, they would resolve the racial problems on their own. It was parents, outsiders, and unspecified "others" who complicated the issue.

> They should leave the kids alone. The parents should educate themselves and examine our own values and not put it on their kids. If the parents would have just left everything alone, I'd say everything would have gone along smoothly. . . . [The parents] are the ones who made the fuss. I'm not letting my kid go over there, and chained themselves to buses. They made all the trouble and then they made the kids aware of it.

The basic "goodness" of children is not questioned and lack of interference by adults will result in the most beneficial outcomes. It was widely accepted that students reflect their home environment and that the school can do little to affect the home significantly. Misbehavior is particularly

attributed to home influence and is not conected with the school. The rhetoric of caring is most often expressed in relation to the student's home background. A school secretary summarized her frustration at dealing with one particularly difficult youngster by saying:

> I guess it just matters where they're from and how they are brought up.

One experienced teacher at West explained the problem in terms of the low socio-economic status of many of the Pawnee families.

> We don't have a socio-economic group. Pawnee has a mixture. We can't do anything for the community since the school is a chunk of the community. It's like making fish more wet. We are not well-to-do--rich. Pawnee is a working class town. It always has been.

For her, there is a little that the school can do to counteract home influence on the students.

One result of the fact that rhetoric has come to surround desegregation is to effectively end concern with the problems of race at West. A black teacher disagrees with the rhetoric and questions how useful the effort to desegregate the schools has been:

> What its done, busing that is, is to have effectively taken the life out of us. There is no more fight left in us. No one cares anymore. It seems as though we have all just sort of accepted the fact and there's a trend not to oppose the voices that are against us. What you may not understand is that busing is a "tool". Busing has been used to not integrate or that they call desegregate us, but busing has served for even more segregation. . . .there was a time when white students were interested. They did want to find out about the life of black students and black people in general. Busing has been used to take that away. Busing brought out all the hostilities and its done much more than what I can say to you here today.

Black students describe their positive memories of "almost all-black" Junior High School. One student expresses his recollection in the familiar terms of the rhetoric of concern:

> It was almost all black back then and we had a good school. We worked together, we cared--the teachers cared. Everyone cared. But now I feel as though no one cares. I feel as though I could "drop dead" right in this spot and no one would care what happened to me!

For these students, much of this quality has been lost as a result of desegregation. As another student comments:

> There is all this talk about equality of educational opportunity but all I can say is that I've got a bus ride.

The "wide fan of messages" in the language of desegregation does not communicate to these black students who have been unable to recapture their "good feeling" about themselves and their school at Pawnee West.

The way people "talk about desegregation" involves a usually explicit comparison with the "violent" days of the past. We are repeatedly reminded that "things are a lot better than they used to be". There is a satisfaction among those people who remember those more turbulent times that does not necessarily reflect the important concerns of public education now. Staff at West recognize the limitations that the memory of the violent past imposes and they are trying to "ease up". But "easing up" on safety measures will not automatically allow the confrontation of the other difficult issues that surround the education of the youth at Pawnee West. What is the concern of school staff about how students spend their time outside school? What are the negative educational consequences of the pattern of avoidance that characterizes the reaction of many students to their learning experience at the high school? What part does West play in attacking the persistent problems of discrimination that are so much a part of minority group life in Pawnee? It is not so much that safety is less of an issue as these other concerns are becoming more of an issue and can no longer be relegated to a secondary position behind the protection of clientele.

Many people at West resent the emphasis which desegregation has placed upon "noticing what color a student is". They assure us that they are "color-blind" and dislike having to "worry about" how many whites or

blacks are involved in a particular activity. Our observations tend to support the contention that many of the staff are not primarily concerned about the race of their students. However the conditions at West are such that consideration of race is important in providing equal educational opportunities to all West students. Our data reveal situations approaching "color blindness" taking place only when the students were so intently engaged in some common enterprise that they forgot about themselves. Bi-racial contact among students seems to be directly related to the degree of involvement that students have in academic work, athletics, clubs, "drugs" or social events. Many students have little involvement in any of these or other high school activities because of their fear of bi-racial contact. To the extent that "color blindness" prevents the school organization from "seeing" these students and providing them with alternative experiences that work to break down their pattern of fear, ignoring the race of a student may be a disservice to his/her education.

By treating desegregation as if it has been accomplished once and for all, the continuing racial problems at Pawnee West can be denied, avoided, minimized or categorized in such ways as to prevent them from being recognized, confronted and improved. Furthermore, racial tensions are forced "underground" and the violence that may be associated with these tensions in the students' minds is not perceived as any longer a serious issue. The concerns which many students have about violence become identified as isolated and individual problems and the student must deal with them as best he/she can, often by avoidance. Finally, a rhetoric has grown up around desegregation at Pawnee West which includes the statement made over and over again by students, parents, teachers and administrators:

students who have learned to cope with others who are different from themselves have learned an important social skill. The experience of attending a "desegregated school" is believed to give the students a "taste of real life" that more than compensates for any academic deficiency. One student explains it this way:

> In a school like ours with so many different people, you got to cope with people who are different. I think like that they finally realize that you got to cope with people in different ways. You can't treat everybody the same way and I think they have come to realize this in our school.

Our observations and discussions, however, convince us that this experience is not as wide spread at West as many believe it to be. Many of the social learning experiences of students are not consistent with the view that contact will lead to increased understanding and acceptance of different people.

Students are affected by desegregation differently. For example, some whites are isolated, afraid to venture into unknown places and reluctant to face new challenges. Some groups of black girls, on the other hand, appear to enjoy the new opportunities that are open to them at West, such as cheerleading, Homecoming contests, and club activities. The emphasis on athletic success at West has made it possible for some black males to receive recognition both inside the "hard walls" and outside in the community. But the black males not actively engaged in athletics or academic activities often try to bask in the reflected aura of the "brothers", unrealistically assuming that they too will be able to obtain social rewards without the hard work and disciplined participation required for these achievements. As a result, we found many unrealistic expectations among some of these students. In a varied student body responses to experiences will be different, and the same event can have powerful influences on different sets of actors. Yet, many would like to perceive the desegregated experience as a uniform, monolithic event with the same consequences for all.

One could argue further that West's experience is indicative of the desegregation controversy as a whole. The debate over busing has obscured the more complex issues of poverty, unemployment and economic discrimination that affect equality of opportunity just as efforts to preserve neighborhood schools from busing obscure the more difficult issues of residential segregation. To the degree that desegregation is viewed independently of such basics as learning, developing competence and fostering trust in school relationships, it becomes more rhetoric-like, giving the appearance of solution while leaving basic issues untouched.

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